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ABSTRACT

When readers encounter Shakespeare's "Sonnet 73," they often fail to realize that it is an excellent model of what a good composition ought to be. The closing couplet functions the same way a thesis would in a prose work. The repetition of wording within the analogies in the three quatrains helps to make the work coherent. In addition, the diminishing time frame adds to the coherence because it would be impossible to reposition the quatrains without destroying coherence. The quatrains gain their unity by virtue of being so clearly connected to the same theme--the imminence of death as it relates to the endstage of all four cycles: the dying year, the dying day, the dying fire, the dying human. The poet achieves emphasis by repeating the same theme with varied images and varied analogies focused on the lover's complaint. It can be seen that "Sonnet 73" contains the bare essentials of good composition: coherence, unity, and emphasis. It teaches a respect for organization, a respect for flow, and a respect for focus. More than anything else, "Sonnet 73" reveals that the art of writing is essentially the art of thinking. (CR)

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Shakespeare as Teacher

When readers encounter Shakespeare's "Sonnet 73," they often fail to realize that it is an excellent model of what a good composition ought to be. The fact that it is poetry doesn't mean that it can't easily serve both as a guide to writing an English sonnet and a guide to good, composition, poetic or prosaic. The closing couplet, which literally serves as the bottom line of the piece, functions as a thesis does in a prose work:

> This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong
> To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

The *this*, of course, is what the speaker, obviously not Shakespeare himself, for he was a young man when he wrote the poem, refers to in the analogies developed so carefully in the three quatrains, which I refer to as Q1,Q2, and Q3.

In Q1 he gives us a fine analogy, a man in the winter of his life, clearly winter, for the leaves are few, and those which remain are yellow. In other words, they've been frosted, yelllowed by the cold.

> That time of year thou mayst in me behold,
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang
> Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
> Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

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J. Hurley

We have here great imagery, easily observable by anyone in a temperate climate. We have, also, a portrait of an old man, a lover, in this case, who issues a typical lover's complaint. I point him out as a lover because he uses the intimate form--*thou*--rather than *you*. The lover's complaint is a conventional fixture of Elizabethan poetry. It was nothing new with Shakespeare, though I don't know if anyone has presented it as effectively. Before leaving this quatrain, however, Shakespeare makes an even higher appeal, an intellectual one, by way of analogy. The speaker in the winter of his life is like nature in the last of its seasonal cycles. The natural cycle, like the human cycle, is nearing its end. Death is imminent in both. Now he continues the theme of the imminence of death in Q2:

> In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
> As after sunset fadeth in the west,
> Which by and by black night doth take away,
> Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.

We have a changing picture of nature, but the change is not an essential one. The speaker is still approaching death through old age and still complaining, obviously. . The imagery is again easily observable by all of us at all times. We have all probably watched sunset slip into twilight which then fades into night. We have nature again at the end of a cycle, as day gives way to night. So The emotional appeal is also still there, for his condition has not changed. He is experiencing the twilight of his life. The analogy is again a sound one: a man in the twilight of his life, clearly evening twilight, as evidenced by the second line of Q2, is like a day about to end.

As the poet moves smoothly and logically into the third quatrain, he gives us the same connections. The dying fire presents a universal image:glowing embers on a bed of ashes. The fire is about to go out. Analogically, the speaker's fire is about to go out. The picture changes, but the portrait of a man on the brink of death remains. The theme of the imminence of death is as pronounced here as it is in the two previoius quatrains. And again Shakespeare has incorporated the same appeals: sensual by way of the imagery, emotional by way of the man's complaint about his condition, intellectual by way of analogy. This last analogy promotes the theme most effectively, for the fire is just about out. And so is his.

In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.

So the *this* referred to in the closing couplet is a threefold *this* revealed in each quatrain. The listener perceives this image of a cycle in its end stage(Q1), this second image of another cyclic end stage (Q2), and this third image, again of the last, the dying stage, of a fire (Q3). Notice how the time frames posed in each quatrain represents time on a diminishing scale: season (Q1), day (Q2), moment (Q3). The listener, whether a he or a she, is in any case an intimate (thou, thy) whose love has now grown intense because of an awareness of impending loss:

This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong ,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

Is the speaker being cynical (What took you so long to love like

this?) or charitable (It's only human to get intense about an impending loss.)?

We have a complete lesson in composition, not an elementary lesson but a rather sophisticated one. Consider the closing couplet as thesis. Then check the quatrains out for coherence. The diminishing time frames make it impossible to reposition the quatrains without destroying the coherence. Even if the order were reversed, that is, if we shuffled them so that the order were Q3,Q2,Q1, the result would be incoherent because as the poem progresses, the gap between life and death ought to logically narrow, not widen. Death would seem less imminent rather than more imminent if the order were completely reversed. And if we made Q2 the first quatrain or the last one, the sonnet fall apart logically. This is integrity in a work of art. We can't move one part without destroying the total effect. To be sure, this sonnet provides the most effective lesson in coherence.

To discover the poem's unity is a much easier matter. The quatrains gain their unity by virtue of being so clearly connected to the same theme: the imminence of death as it relates to the endstage of all four cycles: the dying year, the dying day, the dying fire, the dying human. All these things are the *this* which the listener perceives.

The poet achieves emphasis by repeating the same theme with varied images and varied analogies focussed on the speaker's complaint (I'm old, and now you're warm). In the couplet he tells the listener what is so obvious, obvious in two ways, really. It's obvious to this intimate other (thou, thy)

that the speaker's condition is lamentable, suggesting that we can all perceive the condition simply by looking. It's also obvious to the speaker, that it's obvious to the intimate, for the love is now more intense (which makes thy love more strong). Of course, we're now getting into advanced composition with this neat bit of irony. Now that the speaker is about to go, the lover reveals an intensity that apparently was not there before. That's not exactly your ideal love affair, but it is great irony. The heat should not be so long in coming.

So in "Sonnet 73" we have the bare essentials of good composition: coherence, unity, emphasis. Layered on top of those essentials are the consistent sensual appeals embodied in the imagery. On top of that we have the emotional appeal, not much different from the emotional appeals of our own country Western music. Then there is a layer of intellectual appeals done so beautifully by way of the analogies in each quatrain. Add to this the parallel structure, revealed in the opening lines of Q2 and Q3. It could have been embodied in all three Q's, had Shakespeare opted for heavy uniformity of expression rather than variety.

Yet this is not the end, for his most masterful appeal is the metaphysical, the philosophical, which reveals itself in an implied syllogism. We know that the passage of time brings change, and we know that change implies the passage of time. The two are inextricably connected. So in this poem the writer brings together the natural elements in their various forms. Seasonal changes are perceived over a protracted period. Twilights, of course, are perceived daily but briefly. Fireside

perceptions are even briefer. Man enjoys the longest period of observation inasmuch as we can view him from infancy to old age. What we notice most, however, is that *all of nature is subject to time, and this inevitably brings change. Man, of course, is part of nature. Therefore,man is transformed by the passage of time.* This is where Shakespeare moves from poet to philosopher by implying this syllogism.

It's amazing that Shakespeare has done so much with so few lines. He has stayed within the discipline of the English sonnet--fourteen lines of iambic pentameter arranged in three self-contained quatrains, each with its own alternating rhyme scheme. He has treated a conventional subject--a lover's complaint, wedded it to a significant theme--the imminence of death. Love relationships are transitory things. They come and go, grow warm and cool off. Life is a transitory thing, too. Time invevitably changes everything--our loves, our lives.

I don't know if anyone can put any more into a fourteen line composition. I don't know if anyone can put any more thinking into a piece of writing that is, on the surface, primarily lyrical. I doubt if any poet can express himself more logically than this. I doubt if any philosopher can express himself more poetically . Incidentally, this appears, also, to be the forerunner of the dramatic monologue. And if there is a better organized composition than this, I have yet to see it.

This is the most compact bundle of rhetorical principles and elements that I have ever seen. One can learn how to put imagery to practical simply by scanning and analyzing the quatrains in isolation or in combination. The writer can learn how to develop analogies by connecting images to thoughts,

again by careful analysis of the quatrains. It is easy to see how Shakespeare repeats the theme and how he plays a variation on it. Just look carefully; then look again. A respect for organizatgion, a respect for flow, a respect for focus--"Sonnet 73" teaches all these things. More than anything else, it reveals that the art of writing is essentially the art of thinking. There may be thinkers who were not great writers, but there are no great writers who were not great thinkers.